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# MAKING CHRISTIANITY SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY

## I. THE MORAL MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

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*This is the first of six articles by Professor Smith. As the striking title indicates, they will treat of Christianity not as a theoretical system but as a modern democratic movement. In a day when we are apt to lose ourselves in the dust storms of rhetoric and think we have reached reality when we have acquired a vocabulary, these articles put the issue frankly but with the authority of reality. It is easy for the church to mistake complacency for faith and the avoidance of deficits for providential guidance. But the next few years will be times that try men's souls. Only a religion full of faith in God and fraternal service of mankind will be anything more than a social parasite.*

### **I. The Need of a Democratic Christianity**

"The world must be made safe for democracy." So President Wilson announced the ultimate purpose, to secure which the United States joined its forces with those of its Allies in the Great War. The military conquest is now complete. The autocratic powers of the Central Empires have been compelled to capitulate; and before the formal capitulation took place the forces of radical democracy within those empires were fast surging into conscious control of affairs. There can be no doubt about the completeness of the victory for democracy.

But what about the moral equipment of a democratized world? Whatever may be said about the vanquished autocracies, they did organize some sort of social order. They kept men from preying upon one another. They inculcated ideals of loyalty to the nation and thus promoted a common sense of re-

sponsibility. Will the new democracies be able to do this? The perils and difficulties confronting the attempt are written large in the recent history of Russia. There must be a development of loyalty and a sense of common ideals compatible with democratic policies.

What part in the moral inspiration and guidance of the new order can the Christian church expect to have?

It is natural for Christians to feel that they will have a large influence in the coming social order. Are not the teachings of Jesus essentially democratic? What could be a better starting-point than the doctrine of the brotherhood of men and the universal fatherhood of God? How better could wars be avoided and equity established than by following the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount? It is no uncommon thing for Christian people to sit complacently in the presence of one of the greatest upheavals the world has ever

known and to talk easily of the "application of Christian principles."

But let any such complacent Christian become acquainted with the real sentiments of those who are active in the democratic revolt today and he will be startled at the widespread distrust and bitter hostility toward Christianity. The root of this hostility is found in the conviction that the Christian church is part and parcel of a system of special privileges which democracy is bound to demolish. The ethics of Christianity is felt to be formulated so as to uphold "vested rights." We may shrug our shoulders at what seems to us to be an absurd judgment on the religion which we love. But there must be some reason for this feeling. If Christianity is to have a real part in the making of a democratic world the leaders of Christian thought must make sure that they are in inward sympathy with the principles of democracy.

The Christianity which arouses the distrust and opposition of radicals is an ecclesiastical system, organized so as to retain control over the members of the church and so far as possible to exercise influence over the movements of our day. The democratic radical sees priests and clergymen assuming to speak in the name of a divine authority over which popular opinion has no control. He sees creeds prescribed which the believer is not at liberty to criticize. He sees the duties of men defined primarily in relation to an otherworldly realm. Such a religious system looks to the radical like an attempt to govern without the consent of the governed.

If we look at the history of Christianity, we are compelled to recognize that as a system it was developed in a society which was not democratic at all. There was no such thing as democracy, as we understand it, until modern times. Indeed democracy is now only in its beginnings. The organization of the church, the definition of duties, the conception of the relation between God and men, were all formulated under the stimulus of ancient social and philosophical ideals. And these were essentially different from the ideals which enter into the making of modern democracy.

We need only remind ourselves that Christianity had its birth in the age of Roman imperialism, when the affairs of Palestine, as of other regions, were administered from the authoritative center at Rome. We have only to familiarize ourselves with the messianic hope among the early Christians to realize that the consummation of their religious hope was expected to come by divine intervention from heaven rather than by democratic evolution. At the great triumph described in the Book of Revelation the Messiah is hailed "King of kings and Lord of lords." As the Christian movement grew into the Catholic church there came into the foreground the doctrine of the divine authority of the church, vested in the bishops, who received their right to rule by apostolic succession from Christ, just as an earthly king rules by right of descent rather than by popular suffrage. During the Middle Ages the church became the literal rival of the Holy Roman Empire; and down to this day Catholicism is the very

embodiment of autocracy in religion. The clergy possess an authority derived from a transcendent source and existing independently of the opinion or choice of the laity. Protestantism too has for the most part conceived Christianity as a system authoritatively imposed from above, and has resented any criticism of this authority.

In short the Christianity of ecclesiastical organization represents to a large extent in religion precisely those ideals which growing democracy is eliminating from political life. The spirit of benevolence in Christian leaders has, as a rule, guaranteed the beneficent character of the activities of the church, even when these are autocratically managed. There has therefore not been the resentment against religious autocracy which has been provoked by political tyranny. Yet even here church history records a significant number of protests and reforms.

## II. The Ideals of Autocracy

Autocracy is a society governed from the top down. The ruler in any group possesses the right to rule, not from the consent of the governed, but by virtue of certain inherent privileges. Men are divided into classes, each class having its distinct code of ethics, in order to preserve the fundamental distinctions between the classes. Thomas Aquinas, the great theological systematizer of mediaeval conditions, in one definition of moral relations declared that every individual owes duties in two distinct directions: every man may be and often is both a ruler and a subject. One must learn to govern justly those who are

dependent upon him, and one must learn loyal obedience to those who have the right to govern him. Every man has a superior to whom he must look up, and most men have inferiors upon whom they may look down. A noble must look up to a king, but he looks down upon common people. In mediaeval law different values were attached to the persons of the members of different classes. To kill a slave was far less heinous than to kill an equal. To kill a member of an upper class was a horrible crime. A master might with comparative impunity injure a slave. But if a slave inflicted a similar injury upon his master the offense received severe penalties.

One of the best-known examples of reasoning from the presuppositions of class distinctions is found in Anselm's famous doctrine of the atonement. You will recall that his reasoning rests on the fundamental proposition that God is an infinite being, while man is a finite being. When man sins against God he injures an infinite being. The guilt of his sin then is infinite. The penalty is to be determined, not by the status of the man who commits the sin, but by the status of the person who is injured. Since God, who is the injured party, is an infinite being, any disregard of God's will, be it never so insignificant a thing externally, is infinitely sinful. For God to require of a finite man the payment of an infinite debt seemed entirely just to one who assigned values on the basis of class distinctions.

We can never appreciate the inner significance of the democratic movement unless we realize that it is instinctively

opposed to the religion and the morality of a class system. We must recall how society was organized on the basis of class distinctions. Every class owes submissive allegiance to the class above and had certain peculiar privileges and rights to which the members of lower classes might not aspire.

In the church men were divided into clergy and laymen. The primary duty of the clergy was to rule spiritually over the laymen. The fundamental attitude of the layman must be that of loyal submission to the rules and requirements of the clergy. On their own part the clergy must be submissive to God or to the vicegerent of God as their superior. Exactly as the layman has no right to question or set aside the authority of the clergy, so the clergy have no right to question or to set aside the requirements of God, their superior.

In politics we have the doctrine of the divine rights of kings. The king owes submission to God alone as his superior. His subjects must not dispute his authority. To this day unquestioning loyalty to the state is often so magnified as to suggest that men are "subjects" rather than citizens.

In industry we have the doctrine of master and servant, in which the servant is supposed to look up to his master as a superior and to give to him unqualified loyalty. We have slavery continuing down into the nineteenth century, with the doctrine that it is a divine institution in which masters hold the inherent right to the persons and the products of slaves.

When society is thus organized we find that morality is likely to emphasize a benevolent patronage on the part of a superior and an unselfish loyalty on the

part of an inferior. This means that the members of an upper class determine what is best for the lower classes. A king determines what the duties of the subjects shall be. The word of the king is law, just because he is a king. The welfare of the common people is thus dependent upon the good-will of the ruler. Bishops and priests prescribe to laymen what they shall believe and what they shall do religiously. Masters define the rights and the duties of servants.

We are familiar with the abuse of this power of superior authority in the various realms. But we should recognize that there was a fine moral code to guide the actions of those who had the right to determine the conduct of inferiors. The motto *noblesse oblige*—class privilege means obligation—expresses the ethical ideal of the age. To this day, when we say that a man behaves like a gentleman we mean that there is a fine sense of honor on which we may depend. The true gentleman would take a genuine interest in the welfare of those of a lower class, but—and this is the important thing—such interest must be a freely given benefit. There must be no sense of compulsion. The gentleman will give gratuities to servants as a personal favor but would regard it as an impertinence for the servant to assume to determine how much the gratuity should be. Cannot a gentleman be trusted to do the right thing? The king will grant favors and concessions to his subjects, but he will resist bitterly any attempt on the part of his subjects to bind him legally. For a king to have to obey laws made by subjects would be intolerable. Did not a Prussian king in the nineteenth

century declare solemnly that he would never allow a written constitution to modify his relationship to God, to whom alone he acknowledged submission? Yet this same king pledged himself to labor loyally for the welfare of the German people in his capacity as ruler. Such service, freely given, seemed to men in former days to be finer than services given as the result of a bargain struck between men.

An interesting example of this conception of rights and duties is furnished by what occurred at the time of the peasants' revolt in England in 1381. Under Wat Tyler a body of peasants marched to London and demanded of the king certain rights. The king gave his word, and the peasants returned to their homes. But the nobles objected to the king's promise because it defrauded them of certain services which, they claimed, were inherently due them. The king thereupon revoked his promise to the peasants in the words: "Villeins you were and villeins you are. In bondage you shall abide, and that not your old bondage but a worse." There was nothing essentially wrong about this according to the code of autocracy. The king, not the subjects, must determine what is right and just. If at one time, owing to a misapprehension of the matter, the king has promised certain privileges, these must be viewed as privileges which may be revoked at the pleasure of the ruler. The honor of the king means the retention of his free action. We have a relic of this code of ethics in dueling, where it is thought to be a disgrace for a gentleman to submit to laws. He must be free to defend his honor in his own way rather

than to acknowledge his inferiority by obeying laws made by common people.

The philosophy of divine rights and of class distinctions prevailed for centuries in the development of Western civilization. Ethical ideals and religious doctrines were formulated in terms of this philosophy. Our inherited ideals are largely in terms of the relationships belonging to this bygone age. Right and virtue are still thought of largely in terms of the ethics of privilege and of "honor." Christianity has embodied in its doctrines and in its morals much of this philosophy. Indeed, in an age when men were thinking and living in accordance with the principles of divine privilege and the conceptions of unrestricted "honor," the only way in which Christian idealism could become effective was to sweeten and purify these existing conceptions of duty. But the development of democracy has introduced into the Western world different conceptions of obligation. If Christianity is to become a spiritual power in our age Christian teachers and preachers must learn to interpret the best moral ideals of our age as consistently as did the great Christian leaders of mediaeval society. We must then understand clearly what are the fundamental principles of democracy.

### III. The Ideals of Democracy

1. *The right of revolution against autocracy.*—The most important thing about democracy is denial of the right of the class system to persist. But since this class system is already in existence there is no way of correcting it by reference to the rules established by the system. Democracy therefore is compelled

to assert its ideals by a *revolution*. The fact that such revolution may and usually does involve violence and bloodshed seems to put the revolutionists in the position of being enemies to mankind. By contrast the "law and order" of the existing government is exalted, and the excesses, either actual or possible, of revolutionists are cited as evidence of the immoral character of the democratic revolt.

In spite of our natural dread of what may happen if men are released from a sense of obligation to existing authority, we must recognize that the growth of democracy in an aristocratic society involves the assertion of the right of revolution. Democracy means that the people claim for themselves the right to determine what is just. But, as we have seen, the fundamental principle of autocracy is the right of a superior to determine *for* his inferiors what they should do. For the inferior to refuse to accept this judgment would be in and of itself a rebellion against "constituted authority." In so far, therefore, as autocratic ideals are actually in force democratic efforts can make a start only by challenging the established order.

If now, as has generally been the case, the autocratic order is believed by those who adhere to it to be divinely established, the democratic revolution looks like a defiance of God's laws. In such a case democratic ideals will express themselves in radical criticism of the religion which supports the old order. Not that democratic aspirations are necessarily irreligious. Indeed those contending for popular rights often invoke a divine sanction for their attempts; but even so,

it involves a different kind of religion from that of the established order.

Let us look briefly at two or three of the important events in the development of democracy. Englishmen delight in looking back to the day of Magna Carta, when in the struggle between King John and the English barons the King was compelled to sign an agreement to recognize certain privileges of the barons which he had not wished to regard. Perhaps one of the greatest features of Magna Carta is that it was no Utopia, embodying impossible aspirations. It was a simple recital of the inherent rights of these barons, who had suffered much because of the arbitrary way in which the King had attempted to use their services and tax their estates. While in content it was not at all revolutionary, it did embody a revolutionary principle. It denied the divine right of the King to play fast and loose with the convenience of other men as his fancy might dictate. Archdeacon Cunningham in a recent book says: "The strongest safeguard against the temptation which besets rulers to exercise their powers as they like at the moment, and even for their personal advantage, is afforded by the theistic belief that those who rule are responsible to God for the manner in which they discharge their duty."<sup>1</sup> Experience seems to teach, however, that it is hardly safe to allow the ruler to be the sole judge of what are his responsibilities in the sight of God. Magna Carta affirms in no uncertain way that the ruler must be responsible to the people whom he rules as well as to God, and that they have the right to determine what their interests are.

<sup>1</sup> *Christianity and Social Questions*, p. 48.

In this connection it is interesting to recall that King John did not regard his signature to the charter as at all binding on him. As was true of the peasants' revolt, to which we have already referred, the King felt that he had a right to revoke any agreement made with those who were not his peers, on the ground that his authority was absolute and could not be abridged. He almost immediately violated the provisions of the charter, and in this violation he was supported by the Pope at Rome, who declared the Magna Carta null and void on the ground that it had been extorted from the King by force. The papal bull declared, "A document of this kind we utterly repudiate and condemn." Thus did autocracy in the church stand by autocracy in the state.

Another great landmark in the growth of democracy is the so-called Bill of Rights which marks the English Revolution in 1689, when the bitterly contested attempts at autocracy on the part of the Stuart kings were ended by the establishment of the new dynasty under William and Mary. This historic document is of profound significance for at least two reasons: (a) By making the new king and queen depend upon the will of parliament instead of upon natural descent it repudiated the theory of the divine rights of kings. The right of a king to rule depends upon the consent of the governed. The rights of men are asserted over against the claim of a divine right held immune from human criticism. (b) The actual deeds of a king are declared to be subject to the consent of the people. The Declaration states that "the pretended power of suspending of laws or the execution of

laws by regal authority without consent of parliament is illegal"; also that "the pretended power of dispensing with laws or the execution of laws by regal authority, as it hath been assumed and exercised of late, is illegal." Government from above downward must cease. Righteous government must be a co-operative matter in which the governed have the right and the duty to aid in ascertaining principles of justice.

A third great event in the progress of democracy is one in which we of the United States take pride. It is the stout resistance of the Englishmen in the colonies of the New World to the exercise of autocratic power by the King of the mother-country. The issue was perfectly definite. The colonists claimed the right to determine for themselves what was just in certain particulars. King George and his advisers wanted to retain for themselves the right to determine what principles should govern the colonists. The King was ready to make concessions, provided these should be regarded as privileges freely granted by him. The colonists were ready to forego the conveniences of such privileges and ultimately to resist to the death in order to assert their own right of self-government. It is unfortunate that the easy pictorial way of describing this struggle in the histories made it seem like a conflict between two nations. As a matter of fact it was a struggle between two ideals, and in both the mother-country and the colonies men were divided over this issue. Shall government be from above downward? Or shall it be a co-operative matter in which all concerned shall have the right to help to determine what is just? The hostility



of the American government to the idea of a king was due to the fact that a king suggests overhead control, and the Americans were bound to organize a government resting on the consent of the governed.

It should be noted that violent revolution occurs because the rules of the game are so fixed by autocracy that nothing legal can originate save by the will of the ruling power. Just in so far as autocratic principles actually control society democracy can proceed only by revolution; but when once democracy is established discussion and criticism may come from within the group and be embodied in changing legislation and revised constitutions. This is one reason why an autocracy provokes wars more inevitably than does a democracy.

2. *The principle of equal rights for all.*—The class system of society means favoritism. The ruler, or the member of the upper class, is entitled to grant privileges to those beneath him according to his own sweet will. The fact that one man has received from above a special advantage does not entitle his neighbor to claim that advantage as a right. If one master freed his slaves, as he had a perfect right to do, this did not mean that the slaves of a neighboring master could clamor for emancipation as a right. We find this system of favoritism in the theological doctrine of unconditional election. From the point of view of autocracy God cannot be reproached with injustice because he elected to save some while allowing others to go to eternal damnation. It was a sublime exhibition of God's benevolence that any are saved at all. Those who are not elected cannot

claim that any wrong has been done them.

When democracy asserts the right of the so-called lower classes to determine for themselves what they regard as just, it is necessary to ground this right in something more defensible than simple covetousness. The moral defense of revolution consists in establishing the doctrine that there is inherent in human nature a dignity which entitles all men to equal rights. Magna Carta embodied the rights of a special class, the barons, against the king. But it was only as the barons could make it appear that they were vindicating universally valid rights that their struggle could become something more noble than a campaign in force for special privilege. Indeed, so surely as a revolution allows itself to become a mere struggle for the exclusive advantage of a lower class it loses its moral character and drifts toward terrorism. The Bolshevik movement, because it restricts rights to one class only—the proletariat—is driven inevitably to autocratic rule rather than to real democracy. On the other hand, enduring democracies proceed to remove one after another of the disabilities left over from the autocratic régime, thus bringing more and more clearly to expression the essential principle of equal human rights. Slavery was incompatible with democracy and had to go. Religious tests as a basis of citizenship had to disappear. Women are now coming to their rights as a consequence of the logic of democracy.

In this connection Christianity has found itself hampered by its aristocratic traditions. The persistence of an established church is part and parcel of an

aristocratic distinction between those who are religiously privileged and those who are not. To this day the established church in England enjoys a privileged income from the state. There was a long and bitter struggle before dissenters were admitted to equal political rights with Anglicans. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony for some time the right to vote was restricted to those who were members of the church. All this was the expression of the autocratic principle that those who did not belong to the church should be governed from above by their superiors.

Indeed the principle of equal rights was formulated by the rationalists of the eighteenth century, who were insisting on a democratic religion, in which every man should have the right to do his own religious thinking instead of being compelled to accept a doctrine prescribed for him by ecclesiastical authority. Appeal was made to the original, divinely created, nature of man, in contrast to existing autocratic practices, as a standard by which to judge human rights. All subsequent devices of church or state must be corrected by this test. John Locke declared: "Men being by nature all free and equal and independent, no one can be put out of this estate and subjected to the political power of another without his own consent." The Declaration of Independence of the American Colonies reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights," etc.

The great moral foundations of democracy were formulated, not primarily by the church, which was still cherishing its

quest for special privilege, but to a large extent by men who had broken with the church religiously precisely because they insisted on the right to do their own thinking instead of having creeds prescribed from above. So suspicious was the democracy of America of the attitude and temper of organized religious bodies that it expressly guarded itself against the possibility of the control of government by any church. Democracy was secularized in order to preserve its moral constitution. For as long as a distinction is drawn between the church and the "world" it is easy for the church to assume an autocratic attitude and to attempt to prescribe what those not of the church shall think and do. Democracy can rest securely only upon the inherent dignity of man as man, not upon the accident of his attachment to any special group or class.

3. *The responsibility of citizens for good government.*—In an autocracy all responsibility for laws is assumed by the ruling class. The subject has no duty save to obey. He may indeed growl and protest if things go badly, but his only redress is to petition the ruler to bring about reforms. It is the ruler alone who is responsible for deciding what just laws are.

Whenever people are thus governed from above they inevitably develop the habit of thinking in terms of extorting some better advantage for themselves from the responsible authority. In case the ruler is exceptionally benevolent a spirit of loyal gratitude may prevent adverse criticisms. But history shows that in the long run a "lower" class will come to the point of seeking its own selfish welfare whenever it thinks it has

any power to compel favorable attention to its demands. Autocracy thus makes for selfishness.

This selfish attitude often continues into a democratic society. Sectionalism in politics and class struggle in industry are only too common. The full meaning of democracy is realized only when the citizens become conscious of themselves, not as claimants for special benefits, but as responsible partners in the conduct of a great enterprise for the common good. Nothing is more sordid than a so-called democracy which is nothing but a scramble of parties and factions and individuals for the spoils of political warfare. Indeed, if the spirit of selfishness prevails it will inevitably nullify any democratic government; for a minority shut out from a share in the plunder may set up a revolution and thus disrupt the government.

Our minds are still so occupied with the first step toward democracy, that is, the wresting of power from autocratic holders of it, that far too little attention has been given to the more important task of developing a sense of civic responsibility. We have seen that in the old motto *noblesse oblige* there was a fine spiritual restraint. Unless a democracy embodies something as morally noble as the conception of "honor" in the ethics of autocracy it is headed for disaster.

The attaining of a sense of sacred responsibility for the common welfare involves something like religious devotion. It is a common factor in current Christian exhortation to stress one's civic duty. But it may fairly be questioned whether such exhortation is always given in the spirit of a religion

suited to democracy. Just as long as civic duty is felt to be an obligation to something external a democratic inspiration of morality has not been reached. If the choice be between mere "loyalty" to a government and the opportunity to secure special privileges from the government, it is to be feared that loyalty will be but lip service. The surest way in which to secure a sense of moral responsibility is to assume actual responsibility. Is it not time to begin to change the emphasis of our democratic slogans? The attainment of freedom from autocratic control is indeed a great step in advance. But this is simply the preliminary to the acquiring of a morale on the part of free citizens which shall make the new régime actually better than the old. This change of emphasis is the most pressing duty of democracy today.

4. *The democratic control of special ability.*—There always have been and there always will be great differences in ability among men. A society which can encourage inventors, great executives, and capable organizers is the richer in every way. One of the strong points of a monarchy is that the future ruler may be trained from childhood for his special vocation. In a democracy, as it exists today, no such special training can be counted on in a candidate for office. The apparent advantage of the monarchical provision, however, is usually nullified by the absence of any natural talent for government in the majority of heirs to the throne, while in a democracy such natural talent has a chance to come to the front.

Democracies, however, still carry over their ancient jealousy of rulers by autocratic right and are inclined to view

with suspicion any concentration of power. In order to be sure that nobody governs from above we have attempted to make the common citizen responsible for the selection of every petty official. The result is a ballot so complicated that no voter possesses the knowledge necessary to conscientious voting, and there is plenty of opportunity for self-seeking politicians to promote special interests. We are beginning to work out the principle of the short ballot, whereby the elected official is given a chance to make good in his own way and with the selection of his own helpers, thus enabling special ability to find scope for its powers. But the official is to be held responsible for results, and the people may judge whether he is or is not competent to serve them.

It is in the industrial realm that there is most need of the recognition of this principle. How naturally we have transferred to the world of modern business the titles which we have repudiated in our politics! We have our "coal barons" and our "money kings" and a host of other industrial "magnates." Such titles do not arise without a corresponding reality behind them. To the proposal to "democratize" business the answer is that business demands such special ability that failure would be sure if every measure were to depend

upon the votes of the employees, or if the people should elect the managers. But may there not be democratic control of special ability without the displacement of special ability? Cannot such ability be so organized as to serve the spirit of democracy instead of arousing jealousy? That is the great problem of the next generation.

In an autocracy the common man had only to be loyal to his superior. A religion which laid stress on unquestioning loyalty would train a man admirably for life in such a society.

In a democracy the right of criticism, the self-determination of convictions, the responsibility of the citizen for the public welfare, and the subjection of special ability to democratic control are essential. What kind of a religion will train men for the conscientious exercise of these duties? Is not the conventional conception of salvation adapted to the somewhat passive loyalty of bygone days rather than to the active responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy? Can we not discern a spirit of unrest in Christianity today which, rightly interpreted, indicates a longing of the religious spirit for more adequate ways of expressing democratic aspirations? Does not the dawning of a new era for democracy mean also a new epoch for Christianity?